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ABSTRACT

Some children lack the framework of prior experience necessary for the comprehension and enjoyment of fanciful literature. Fanciful literature, though grounded in reality, deals not only with what is, but also with what could be or might have been. Since readers actively construct meaning by relating what they read to their conceptual systems, certain elements of fanciful novels may cause frustration. First, because the setting is often the author's invention, readers must cope with the author's careful descriptions of it and must often create a mental map of a new country. Readers must also deal with a history of a people that does not exist, organizing many names and events in their minds. Language and style can also cause confusion, since fanciful works may include archaic language, unusual structure, and allegorical plots, and are in many cases the works of British authors. Finally, the need to cope with the ambiguity of fantasy may be burdensome to readers. In anticipation of these difficulties, teachers should read fanciful works aloud and help children to deal with the ambiguities involved, thus developing a prereading framework of experience. (The paper cites specific fanciful novels and includes a list of classroom activities to develop creativity.) (GW)

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Fanciful Literature and Reading Comprehension

Symposium: Using Creative Thinking and Fanciful Literature to Enhance Reading Comprehension--Psychological and Pedagogical Implications

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FANCIFUL LITERATURE AND READING COMPREHENSION

In C.S. Lewis's (1950) The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, Lucy enters the land of Narnia through the wardrobe. When she returns from that world, Susan, Peter, and especially Edmund question that she has been anywhere except inside the wardrobe. After Lucy's second visit to that other world, Peter and Susan seek the assistance of the old Professor. He suggests, much to their amazement, that Lucy may be telling the truth.

> "But do you really mean, Sir," said Peter, "that there could be other worlds--all over the place, just round the corner--like that?"
>
> "Nothing is more probable," said the Professor, taking off his spectacles and beginning to polish them, while he muttered to himself, "I wonder what they do teach them at these schools" (1950, p. 46-47).

Lewis's concern for the lack of imagination and the world of fantasy in the public school curriculum is not to be taken lightly. In his parting comments at the end of this fanciful novel, he reiterates his concern through the voice of the professor as he explains to the children how this other world is entered.

> "Eh? What's that? Yes, of course you'll get back to Narnia again some day. Once a King in Narnia, always a King in Narnia. But don't go trying to use the same route twice. Indeed, don't try to get there at all. It'll happen when you're not looking for it. And don't talk too much about it even among yourselves. And don't mention it to anyone else unless you find that they've had adventures of the same sort themselves. What's that? How will you know? Oh, you'll know all right. Odd things, they say--even their looks--will let the secret out. Keep your eyes open. Bless me, what do they teach them at these schools?" (1950, pg. 186).

I suspect that Lewis wishes us to consider seriously his repeated question. For the children in this story, the wardrobe was their entry to the world of fantasy. Have we prepared all children to enter that wardrobe, or have we, as the professor suggested, been remiss in our duties? Have we trapped our children in the here and now? Are too many of our children lacking the experiences necessary to consider the world and characters of the imagination?

When Lucy enters the wardrobe, she is like our successful creative reader, she is willing to believe in, trust and be patient with the ambiguity of Narnia.

But some of our students are like Edmund who is so easily misled by the White Witch. Some children have difficulty identifying the important cues in that reading experience. They seem to lack the schemata, that framework of prior experience necessary for the comprehension and enjoyment of the fanciful literature.

Defining Fanciful Literature

Fanciful literature is many things. It is the here and now examined from afar; it is a mixture of order and surprise; it is predictable reality with occasional unpredictable twists; it meets expectations with unanticipated turns; it is comprehendible reading with a few puzzles left unexplained; it uses common language with stretched meanings; and its episodic events expose the complexity of man. Fanciful literature is many things, but fantasy is mostly reality.

The Reality of Fantasy and Comprehension

If we take the position suggested by Lloyd Alexander (1968) "that fantasy and realism . . . both grow from the same creative impulse, the same fertile soil of imagination, (then) what we can say about one essentially we can say about the other. The differences lie in the medium, not the message." (p. 2) At the heart of fantasy, reality is confirmed. Fantasy strives to add light to human values, to transmit them. Recognizing this, the child cannot and should not put his reality to one side, actually we want to encourage the children to bring all their knowledge to the fantasy. At the same time, the children need to know as Lawrence Yep (1978) so clearly stated that ". . . our sense of reality is actually a social consensus about our world: We agreed not only upon what things to see but what things not to see." (p. 138) He tells us that "the error lies in treating our sense of reality as absolute rather relative." (p. 138) It would seem that children need to approach fantasy as an activity involving the "creative adjustment of reality . . ." (Alexander, 1974, p. 759). Another way of saying that is fantasy expands reality and deals with not only what is, but what could be or might have been.

To assist the reader to adjust reality within the structure of the fanciful work, the author provides the readers with the cues necessary for easing into the new world without having the reader lose his sense of predictability. The competent author carefully grounds the fantasy in reality and in doing so maintains a sense of the here and now. As Rebecca J. Lukens (1976) indicated, it is that "persuasion that the

writer wishes to bring about--persuasion that 'what if' is really 'it's true'" (p. 108).

The Problem

Earlier in my introduction to this symposium, I shared with you my concern with the problems some of my students experienced with reading fanciful literature. Because I feel that these adult reading problems may be indicative of similar problems children may have in reading fantasy, I would like to have you explore with me some possible sources for this difficulty. The ideas are the result of many conversations with those students--readings, reflections and many discussions with colleagues as I have attempted to understand why some readers are Lucys' and others are Edmunds'.

Let me first warn that much of what I have to say is based on the premise that reading fantasy, particularly high fantasy, demands more from the reader than most of the realistic fiction which is enjoyed by intermediate level school children, such as that by Beverly Cleary, Judy Blume and Scott Corbett.

Reading Defined

Kenneth Goodman (1976) defines reading as follows:

> Reading is an active process of constructing meaning from language represented by graphic symbols systematically arranged . . . . The entire process of reading can be best understood when consideration is given to the devices within language that convey meaning and the ways readers interpret and react to these devices (p. 265).

In other words, the reader constructs meaning from what he reads:

> by relating these to the conceptual system he had constructed in the course of his development. The richness of meaning that he derives from his reading will depend both upon the quality of the material he is reading and upon the breadth and depth of his conceptual understanding (Elkind, 1976, p. 337).

In speaking to this richness of meaning, David Elkind (1976) suggests that one's "satisfaction in reading is often derived, in part at least, from the degree of fit between the material being read and the conceptual level" of the reader (p. 337).

Fanciful Literature and Comprehension

If we may assume that these are accurate descriptions of how one reads, then we would need to consider what it is in the fanciful novels which would deter the reader from completing a novel or cause the reader to be frustrated by a work. Of course, as we explore these qualities, we must keep in mind that these elements will not cause every reader the same degree of difficulty. The interaction between work and reader will be dependent as we mentioned earlier on the personality and cognitive experiences the child has already had with fantasy as well as the child's overall background.

The Setting

Let's first look at that backdrop to the fanciful work, the setting. Because the setting is often an invention of the author and may be very unlike our world, it may require that the author elaborate on this unique, special vision. Depending upon the break with our real world setting, the

reader may have to be patient with the author's careful description. For example, in E. B. White's (1952) Charlotte's Web, the barnyard and a fair ground are within the background experience of most readers, but this is not true of the land of Green-sky in Snyder's (1977) Until the Celebration. In reading this particular story, I found myself struggling to create a mental image of the setting. In this story, gigantic trees house the above-ground characters. These trees were so large that travel was along glide paths and branch paths. Maybe as I share this with you, you have an image of a solid walkway. For about one-half of this book, I even envisioned the glide paths as being some type of moving walk. My misconception of this aspect of the setting resulted in confusion. Knowing I was reading the last in the series, I recognized that I had to expect these kinds of ambiguities which might have been clearer in the earlier works. Actually, the glide path is an open space between the branches of the trees that allows one to glide between trees and at different levels, using a gauze-like fabric attached to the arms and ankles to catch air and help control the flight.

Another type of problem found with the setting may be the necessity to create a mental map of a new country or land. Again, the reader must assume some responsibility in creating the image of this world, in order to keep track of the action. Tolkein, Alexander and even Lewis's works are examples of novels that require a new setting. Most authors aid the reader in this problem by including setting elements that are common to the reader's experience, like trees, rivers, mountains, valleys, etc.

More recently authors have also included maps. On occasion, the setting may assume a living-being quality in which one finds the setting almost consciously taking part in the struggles of the characters, such as in Alexander's (1968) The High King. Children are probably more comfortable with things and animals assuming human or special powers than personification of the setting which may be unexpected enough to cause confusion.

The History of the Fanciful Characters

Not only must the children deal with a different geography but also a history of a people that does not exist. In order to give the reader the sense of a story that contains more than what is actually presented, the author may appear to give the reader a sampling of adventures in a tip of the ice-berg fashion. The use of references to characters and events of the past may be another source of confusion while adding to the cognitive load necessary to organize many names and events. One of the major complaints of my college students was concerned with the problem of keeping track of too many characters. One likened this to the problem of reading a Russian novel. A few said they had to write down characters' names and their roles in the story to keep track of it all. These students are aware of strategies that can help them, but I suspect the Edmund readers in our schools would give up. Since the history is often included as an explanation of what is occurring in the present, it would seem important that children be able to grasp the sense of the past, but they may need our help in developing strategies to cope with the information.

Sometimes, the historical background necessary for filling in the gaps must come from the reader with the author only giving minimal explanation.

This is particularly true in Cooper's (1976) The Grey King, where knowledge about the Arthurian legends will provide meaningful perspective to the story.

As the author attempts to provide the reader with the necessary data, the author walks a fine line between too little or too much description and moving too fast or too slow. If the story is paced too quickly, the author's inventions become suspect; if the pace is too slow, the reader may become bored.

Language and Style

Language and style can be another element which causes the reader to disengage. Literature uses a specialized form of language with its own set of rules and contingencies. Poetic license makes it possible for the writer to reverse some key language priorities for the sake of meter, rhyme, or mood. The inclusions of an archaic language, unusual structure, and the allegorical nature of the plots may cause the work to be less predictable. Related to this is the fact that many of our fine fanciful works are the products of British authors. Not all American children may be able to deal with the subtle differences in word meaning, humor and the somewhat more complex sentence structures of British English which often include many subordinate clauses and parenthetical statements. The Rescuers by Margery Sharp (1959) is an example of such a work.

> The entrance passage, which ran directly at right angles from the wainscot, was quite two and a half inches long, and this was their lobby, where were kept Bernard's cudgel, Nil's sea boots and cutlass, and Miss Bianca's valise. (It was essential to be tidy; and they had the Head Jailer's awful example.) Beyond, between the wainscot and the original granite, and from the stove to the outer wall, stretched a quite commodious apartment (p. 73-74).

Molly Hunter's (1966) works present the reader with similar problems in making successful predictions. The use of the venacular in style and specific terms may cause confusion.

> "Och, he'll come back again," Torquil consoled her. "He'll not be missing his blither with you over Alisdair's foolishness." (p. 33)

> He stood looking at the lock for a minute and then he walked over the burn (p. 76).

To keep things in perspective, an occasional problem like the above probably would not cause enough frustration that the reader would disengage. It is only in those works where there are repeated problems with style and language.

Ambiguity and the Unanswered Questions

The last problem I would like to explore with you is that of ambiguity. The beauty or joy of fantasy is its ambiguity. It affords the reader the opportunity to mull over and puzzle out the meaning of events. Not all is explained. If we might take two recent films, Star Wars and 2001: A Space Odyssey, I think I can show you what I mean. Star Wars leaves little question in the mind of the viewer as to what happened, why it happened and how this relates to man and his place in the universe. This is very unlike 2001 in which the movie may be seen several times and there are still elements to puzzle over. One of the pleasures for me of reading fantasy are those opportunities to explore philosophical conflicts. For the child, who has had little experience with divergent creative thinking, the need to cope with continuing ambiguity may be burdensome.

Reading Strategies for Fanciful Literature

I have tried to explore some of the special qualities of fanciful literature which may cause some readers to experience comprehension difficulties and result in a rejection of the genre fantasy.

I believe that we as teachers need to anticipate these difficulties and therefore provide experiences to broaden the child's creative abilities, reading strategies, and familiarity with fanciful books.

I have some general suggestions and a handout of examples of specific activities.

To increase children's familiarity with the genre of fantasy and build background, read fanciful works to the children. In the early grades, these might include creation tales, how and why tales, legends, as well as modern fanciful literature, such as Elkin's (1966) Why the Sun Was Late, Brooks' (1973) Noah's Ark and Horwitz's (1971) The Strange Story of the Frog Who Became a Prince. Ask questions which help children to think in terms of wholes rather than trivial details. Together, create your own explanations of the world and the things around you.

In the middle grades, read myths and the more complex legends and how and why tales such as those found in McLean and Wiseman's (1961) Adventures of the Greek Heroes. Introduce the children to high fantasy such as C.S. Lewis's The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, Alexander's (1964) Book of Three. Many of these are in series form and could be as appealing as the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys books.

When appropriate during the oral reading, the teacher might lead the children to deal with ambiguities. The class could, as the story progresses,

create or obtain a map of the imaginary country, create a character key or a lineage chart, or create a calendar of important events or a time line. Periodic summarizing of the events may also be necessary. To clarify ambiguities or philosophical points, a brainstorming session could assist the children in seeing that more than one point of view is possible. By working with the class in this way, the teacher models teaching strategies available to the child when reading fantasy independently.

If we look at reading as comprehending and reacting, part of our teaching roles may be to increase opportunity for comprehension by developing a pre-reading framework of experience. The fantasy is a highly imaginative language experience and like most language experiences, it needs language related to fantasy experiences. We need to get kids hyped for the experience.

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CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES TO DEVELOP CREATIVITY

1978 IRA Symposium
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1. A map is drawn of an imaginary island with symbols showing the type of land in each area. The instructions are that the students are the first people in this country and are to decide where they will settle, what trade arrangements will be needed, etc.

2. An activity useful in stimulating fluency of ideas is an add-on story. The story is begun by the teacher with a sentence or two geared to create interest. Each child in turn (or at will), then adds on until the signal is given (bell, whistle, etc.) to change story tellers. This change need not take place at the end of a sentence or a thought. The more often the game is played, the better will be the quality of story produced.

3. Go through magazines and find pictures, words or phrases that make the children think of a specific idea, for example--creation, beauty, joy.

4. Teacher: "I am thinking of something that is soft." (Any form of a descriptive phrase might be substituted, such as something that is high, something that is sticky, etc.) "What could it possibly be?" The children are then to search their minds and experiences to answer the question.

5. Take the two words <u>just suppose</u> and toy with the idea that these two words bring. <u>Just suppose</u> a chemical permeated the atmosphere touching your skin on the way home from school. By morning you discovered that you were invisible.

6. Make up a story about a DOG-LIKE-ONLY-CAT. Ask the boys and girls to conceive an animal that never existed and construct or draw the make-believe animal. After this is completed, let the children name each animal. Encourage the children to write stories about their "made-up" animal.

7. Ask the children to imagine themselves inside a giant raindrop, coming down through the clouds. Let them portray on paper what they observe as they are making their rapid descent.

8. When studying a unit in social studies, children may change the classroom around by rearranging the seats so that each person represents a particular place in a particular country. Care must be taken in terms of relationships of places to each other and distances approximated. The discussion may center around people, places, customs, work, and products.

9. Have the students sing a cumulative song such as "The Rattlin' Bog" or "The Green Grass Grows All Around." Let them add other verses to the song.

10. Permit the students to sing a song that tells a story, adding additional verses to the song to make the story longer.

11. Tell the children that they all live on the same street in a make-believe town and that all of the houses look just alike. They are to add their yard and/or house in a way that would make it different from the other homes and more easily identified.

12. Give the children an abstract picture and let them add as many lines as they can to make the picture their own.

13. Begin a story and let the children add as many details as possible to make it more exciting and mysterious.

14. Tell the children the beginning of a story and let them add an ending. Set a time limit and instruct the children to never stop writing. If they can't think of something else to say, repeat the last sentence over and over until a new idea appears.

15. Give each student a marshmallow. Have them list the following headings on a sheet of paper:: Taste, Smell, Sight, Sound, Touch. Ask them to experiment with the marshmallow in as many ways as they can think of and to record all observations about the marshmallows under the proper headings then have each student write a descriptive paragraph about marshmallows.

16. Play different types of music or make different sounds and have the children move according to the way it makes them feel.

17. Have the children dramatize words such as airy, beauty, hopeful, tremble, painful, exciting.

18. Listen to "In the Hall of the Mountain King" and discuss feelings after listening.

19. Present the children with a story of a person who is trying to solve a certain problem. Arrange the story so that one solution will be fairly obvious to the children. Encourage the children to think of other solutions besides this particular one.

20. A new idea is often in a minority of one, however, to be able to tolerate being in a minority of one is no easy task for most persons. Perhaps this is why so many good ideas are never fully developed. To help the individual tolerate aloneness and possibility of failure is essential if creativity, which implies freshness and newness, is to flourish. After a child has come up with a new idea or invention or creative product, let him stand and defend it to the class. Allow the other members to pick his idea apart and to criticize it. Let him have the experience of backing it up when the odds are against him.

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